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Paul Dennis, new mayor of Camas

CAMAS: CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Longtime mayor hands reins to successor, who voices some criticism

By KATHIE DURBIN
Columbian staff writer

CAMAS — The mayor's swearing-in ceremony at Camas City Hall had the cozy feel of a small-town happening: clicking cameras, jovial banter, Santa Claus passing out candy to elected officials and other dignitaries.

Outgoing Mayor Dean Dossett administered the oath of office to incoming Mayor Paul Dennis and four city councilors.

The changing of the guard comes as Camas confronts the need to diversify its economic base — again. The light-hearted Dec. 22 event also masked some bitterness.

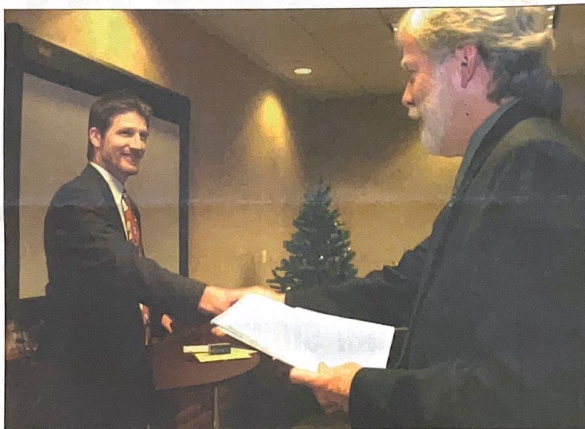
Dennis believes Dossett gave away Camas' best chance for commercial development — the 192nd Avenue corridor between Camas and Vancouver — in a one-hour negotiating session with Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard last June. With their city administrators present, but without representation from their city councils, the two mayors agreed on a plan to divide the unincorporated area that separates the two cities and set new urban growth boundaries accordingly.

"We just gave it to them in my opinion," Dennis said. "It could have been the commercial property we needed."

The agreement is not final until Clark County commissioners incorporate the mayors' agreement into their revision of the county comprehensive plan.

A generation separates the outgoing and incoming mayors of Clark County's second largest city.

Dossett, 61, a retired mill manager with silver hair and beard, worked at the paper mill in Camas for 38 years. He served as mayor for 12 years and as a city councilor for four years before that. During his tenure he presided over a reinvention of Ca-



Photos by KIM BLAU/The Columbian

Outgoing Camas Mayor Dean Dossett, right, shakes hands with Paul Dennis, his successor, at a Dec. 22 swearing-in ceremony at Camas city hall.



"We've more than doubled in size since I've been mayor. Other cities have been devastated by their growth. We've been able to handle growth gracefully."

City gambled on diversification and won

By KATHIE DURBIN
Columbian staff writer

The economic challenge Camas faces today has roots in its unusual history.

Camas' south entrance is dominated by the huge Georgia-Pacific Corp. mill. Its small, charming downtown business district is surrounded by modest older houses.

Lacamas Shores, annexed in 1983, and Prune Hill, annexed piece by piece between 1983 and 1990, are among

Technology firms dominate Grass Valley to the west, annexed as industrially zoned land in 1984.

The Camas Meadows area, annexed in 1997, features an 18-hole golf course built over wetlands and a business park at the city's northwest end that is marketing itself as an ideal location for corporate headquarters.

Between 1980 and 2000, the city nearly tripled in size, growing from 3.8 square miles to 11.34 square miles, and its population nearly doubled.

Mayor:

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mas, begun under his predecessor, Van Henriksen, the city's mayor from 1984 to 1992.

Dennis, 35, a politically savvy economic planning consultant with cropped brown hair and a closely trimmed beard, has served on the council for six years, championing downtown revitalization and responsible growth for the city, which is home to 13,540 people.

Today, Dennis assumes leadership of Camas as it attempts to reinvent itself for the second time in 20 years.

In the early 1980s Camas laid the groundwork for its transformation from a mill town to a technology village. In the early 2000s, it faces the challenge of attracting the commercial development that has so far eluded it.

With few retail options in town, most Camas residents spend their money in the 16th Avenue corridor or elsewhere in the Vancouver-Portland metro area.

Commercial development wasn't a priority 20 years ago, Henriksen said. "We really believed that if we diversified our manufacturing base, especially emphasizing companies that offered good wages and lots of capital investment, we would be in great shape forever."

Things changed with the 2001 passage of Initiative 747, which limits the rate of growth of property tax levies to 1 percent a year unless voters approve a higher ceiling.

"Until Initiative 747, we were probably one of the wealthiest cities per capita in the state," Dossett said.

Camas city government gets 60 percent of its general fund revenue from property taxes.

Without significant sales tax revenue, the city has been hard-hit in the past two years. Before 1997, property tax revenue to the city was increasing by \$300,000 to \$400,000 per year; this year, it increased by only \$70,000.

That has put the squeeze on city government. This year the city reduced staffing at its newly expanded library, eliminated money for street maintenance and borrowed from the Firemen's Pension Fund to shore up its Emergency Medical Services fund, which is in the red.

"Now, even though commercial is risky and doesn't really pay family-wage jobs, it's the only thing that isn't controlled by the initiative," Henriksen said.

After Jan. 1, those won't be Dossett's problems. "I had a great 12 years," he said. "We've more than doubled in size since I've been mayor. Other cities have been devastated by their growth. We've been able to handle growth gracefully."

Legacy of parks

Dossett oversaw the city's development of an industrial economy, but he hopes to be remembered for his efforts on behalf of parks, open space and preservation of several stands of old trees slated for cutting by developers.

"I remember those trees that stood along Lacamas Lake," he said. "We had an opportunity to buy them and we didn't. After having seen those go down, I thought, 'There is no way we can let that happen in the heart of the city.'"

Dennis brings to the mayor's job a grasp of economic and growth challenges throughout the Vancouver-Portland metro area.

From 1990 until 2003, he worked for the Portland-based planning consultant firm E.D. Hovee and Co. He prepared economic analysis for the Port of Vancouver's Columbia Gateway project and the expansion of the Washington State University Vancouver campus. He developed enrollment forecasts for the Vancouver School District and donated time to Camas downtown revitalization. He recently established his own consulting firm, Cascade Planning Group.

Temporary tax weighed

The new mayor says he's ready to tackle the challenges of building a commercial sector to diversify the city's tax base, encouraging more affordable housing and delivering services in a time of tight budgets.

On the revenue front, he is considering proposing a temporary tax on city utilities, which could be enacted without a vote of the people, to bridge the budget gap.

On the job-recruitment front, Dennis believes Camas is well positioned to attract corporate headquarters to the North Dwyer Creek area adjacent to Camas Meadows Golf Course.

"But we are going to be in competition with Vancouver, Hillsboro and Gresham for industrial development," he said. "And in terms of commercial development, it's east Vancouver versus west Camas."

Vancouver won that match, Dennis said, when Dossett signed off on the agreement that will let Vancouver expand its urban-growth boundary to include the 192nd Avenue corridor, including six acres of flat land adjacent to Highway 14. "It could have been our gate-

way to Camas," Dennis said. In exchange, he said, the Camas urban boundary will expand to include an area known as the Bybee Curves, which has wetland issues that could hinder development, and the Strunk property near Water-Tech, where Clark College and the Evergreen School District hope to build an eastern satellite campus.

"There's no money in that for Camas," he said. Friction between the cities over developable land is not new, Henriksen said. "Way back on my watch, Vancouver and Camas were fighting over the land between them."

Camas is under pressure from Clark County planners to increase residential density and its supply of affordable housing.

Downtown housing

Dennis says the county is being inflexible: Camas has its own distinct identity, and its growth-management plan should reflect that.

"You have to start with 'What are your community values?'" he said. "We value parks, open spaces, our community assets."

Camas could hire lawyers to fight the county's density rules and multiple-family residential ratios. "Is that a good use of public money? Probably not," Dennis said.

Instead, the city's draft comprehensive plan would zone downtown for 400 additional housing units, including apartment houses above stores, and encourage renovation of older houses by creating a revolving fund to help owners with the costs of renovation.

Will people move into these dwellings if they are built? "That," Dennis said, "is the \$64,000 question."